

# Greek homosexuality

James Davidson

The phenomenon we might old-fashionedly call ‘Greek Love’, more pedantically ‘Same-Sex Eros’, most vividly ‘Greek Homobesottedness’, is one of the most difficult topics I have tackled as a student of the ancient world, full of evasions and contradictions, and, as I gradually came to realise, one of the least investigated and most poorly understood. During the darkest hours when I thought I must be thick or something, I could at least take comfort from the fact that even Pausanias in Plato’s *Symposium*, talking of the Loveways of his own city of Athens, admits ‘it’s complicated... not easy to grasp’.

Difficult as it is, it plays a central role in almost every aspect of Greek culture, its poetry, its philosophy, its religion, sport, art, warfare, politics, diplomacy, although many textbooks on religion, warfare and history make no mention of it. It is one aspect of antiquity which has seemed most ‘relevant’ to today and yet it makes the Greeks seem quite foreign. Almost every claim about it, down to the most basic vocabulary, is contested and yet it is often treated as straightforward and unproblematic. It is changeable and chimerical, varying from city to city and over time: Greek Homosexualities. What we find in fourth-century Athenian speeches seems very different from the homosexuality we find in the songs of Solon or Sappho, which is different again from the homosexuality we find on Black figure vases during the reign of Pisistratus. Even sexual practices varied, according to what Greeks called the ‘laws’, *nomoi*, laid down by different ‘lawgivers’. In Thebes, Santorini, Lesbos, and Crete there is good evidence for formal, publicly acknowledged ‘wedded’ couples, including troth-plighting, i.e. formal pledges. But despite all this variety, it is often treated as a single stable uniform thing, with one scholar after another popping up to declare ‘it’s all about...’ ‘...power and penetration’, ‘... education and initiation.’

## Starting from scratch

When I accepted an invitation to write a new book about the subject, I thought it would be like Home Improvements, a lick of paint here, some rearranging of the furniture, some new discoveries, a well-placed vase, a general modernization, moving the bedroom back upstairs so that it was no longer the only room in the house. It ended up more like Grand Designs, starting again from scratch. Almost everything you have been told about the subject is likely to be either quite misleading, thoroughly misleading, irrelevant, or quite (demonstrably) wrong.

I would love to give you a guided tour of the new edifice I have tentatively tried to construct, but it is simply too big, a huge rambling mansion with no main entrance, many different wings, each with lots of rooms, many of which have some very interesting original features; as part of the project I also had to investigate what on earth the original builders were thinking of and how it all went so horribly wrong (clue: the desire to deal with the subject has been consistently less passionate than the desire to have it dealt with). On the other hand, I can offer a handful of useful tips I have learnt from my experiences: some of the more serious ‘bodges’ in the old building and some hints as to my blueprint for the new construction on (hopefully) sounder foundations.

## New foundations

Tip 1: Love words: *Eros* refers not to ‘sexual lust’ (*epithumia*) but to ‘passionate love (not excluding lust)’. Its verb *eran* takes an indirect genitive object, like verbs of ‘aiming at’, ‘hitting’, and ‘missing’, implying a targeting or an expeditionary kind of love, the love of ‘I am in love with you’; hence the god Eros has wings to cross long distances, a bow and arrow or a driving goad; he has little to do with satisfaction, sexual or otherwise. *Eros* is the word used by Thucydides of the Athenians’ expeditionary desire to send out a fleet to conquer Sicily, for instance. This is why it is rare to find mention of a ‘mutual *eros*’; it would be like two people ‘carrying a torch for each other’, oxymoronic. *Philia*, by contrast, means not ‘asexual friendship’, but ‘intimate love’ or ‘fond intimacy’ and is used of those who are close: family, friends, colleagues, age-mates, spouses, a courtesan’s ‘lovers’. It is the love of ‘I love you (*philô se*)’ and its verb takes a direct accusative object; in the aorist past tense it means ‘to kiss’. So, for instance, the speaker in Lysias’ speech *Against Simon* denies that he or his rival had *eros* for the boy Theodotus. Rather ‘we both fancied him (*epethumêsamen*)... but I decided to make him my lover (*moi philon einai*) through benefactions...’.

2: Roles and Relationships: *Erastês* is an Athenian term. It does not mean ‘the older active partner in a homosexual relationship’; this is why Socrates in *Phaedrus* can talk of a boy’s ‘crypto-*erastes*’. Rather, it means ‘admirer’, a man smitten with *eros* for someone, who may well be a boy, or for something e.g. ‘tyranny’. It is used for a courtesan’s ‘admirers’ but also for a sophist’s ‘fans’. It can also indicate a social role – ‘one engaged in practices of admiring’ – e.g. writing ‘Leagros is beautiful’ on a wall or a vase, composing songs of praise (‘boy hymns’), sleeping in doorways, or literally following a boy around in the company of rival admirers; hence Aeschines can accuse Demosthenes of having ‘pretended to be an admirer’ of a boy. One of the earliest uses of the term is in Pericles’ Funeral Speech in Thucydides, where he asks the city’s soldiers to be Athens’ *erastai*, i.e. selfless uncal-culating devotees. Friendly foreign powers can also be described as *erastai* of Athens and the plot of Aristophanes’ *Knights* explores the conceit of demagogues as ‘*erastai* of the People’. To describe the object of love, Athenians simply used the participle of *eran*: *erômenos*, ‘passionately loved’, fem. *erômenê*. An *erômenos* might choose to become a ‘boyfriend’ (*philos*) of his admirer, to ‘graciously respond’ (*charizesthai*) to his advances, which often means, especially in the aorist past tense (*charisasthai*), ‘to put out’.

## Age matters

3: Age: This is one of the most misunderstood aspects of same-sex *eros*. Many, if not all, Greek cities had a rigid ‘age-class’ structure, with different privileges for different ‘grades’ (*hêlikiai*). With no annual birthdays, there could be disputes about how old someone actually was. Hence Athenian boys had to go through two physical inspections before they could be certified as ‘Eighteen’, and become citizens. Villages which submitted unsuitable candidates to the Council were fined and the failed candidates sent ‘back to Boys’ (*Paides*) which, therefore, officially referred to those under Eighteen. For the next two years, it seems, they were in the age-grade one up from ‘Boys’, formally known as *Meirakia* or *Neaniskoi*. After that at Twenty they became Men (*Andres*). Here is the first problem: the word *pais*, ‘boy’, can also be used unofficially to mean under-Twenty,

‘not a Man yet’. According to artistic conventions Men are shown full height with beards, Boys are under-height with no beards, and *Meirakia/ Neaniskoi* are inbetweenies, fully developed but beardless, like images of Achilles or Apollo (‘*Neaniskos*’, ‘always a Boy’); for Greeks did not shave – no beard means no beard-growth – and pre-modern people matured about four years later than us moderns, thanks to a low-protein diet.

From the fourth century onwards numerous texts allude to restrictions on unchaperoned intimacy (‘chatting’, ‘mingling’, ‘talk of fond intimacy’, ‘mention of sex’) with ‘Boys’. This anxiety is nicely illustrated by the circumspection with which Socrates approaches the Boy Lysis or indeed Charmides in Plato’s dialogues named after them. Indeed wealthy families kept slave *paidagogoi* whose task was, precisely, to chaperone Boys, though admiring at a distance was encouraged; this paradox is why Pausanias thinks Athenian Loveways are so hard to understand. Moreover, from the seventh century to the fourth, homosexual *eros* is presented as a young man’s game; boys don’t interest men over Forty; Theodotus’ lover in Lysias apologizes for still being involved, at his age, in homosexual affairs. The Boys’ little sisters, on the other hand, were expected to be married to middle-aged men by the age of fifteen. For a few years in the late archaic period red-figure vase-painters show Boys being molested by *Meirakia* and even by Men. These are not, in my view, evidence for a radically different set of rules from those of the fourth century. They are images of anxiety, not snapshots of reality captured by vase-painters wandering around the gymnasium with a cup and a paintbrush; they reveal exactly the same concerns we find in the laws cited by Plato and Aeschines.

### **The (many) things it was all about**

4: ‘It’ was not ‘all about’ any one thing. In the myths of Ganymede, Pelops, and Hyacinthus, it’s all about mortals and immortals and the heroes in between, and the bridging of the gaps that separate them through cult, and, possibly, beauty contests to select Zeus’ boy priests, and the timing of festivals and the movements of the stars... In the myths of Dionysus it’s all about missing the god’s presence and wanting him to appear. In the myths of Achilles and Patroclus or Antilochus it’s all about buddies bonding and warriors being buried together far from home, or about being Greek v. Barbarian. In the fourth century it’s all about politics, or the difference between favours and payments, or persons and things. In Plato it’s all about the schism between flesh and personality. Around Macedonian monarchs it’s all about closeness to the king. In Thebes it’s all about the undivided city. That’s what it’s all about in Crete as well, and in some other places in fact. OK, if you twist my arm, what this same-sex *eros* comes down to is making bonds that are not already there, ‘passionately bridging socially, politically, demographically, and metaphysically given gaps’. That’s what it was all about... among other things.

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